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INTERAGENCY INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT

7 October 1982

Lebanon: Possible Israeli and Syrian Withdrawals

We believe that moving towards a simultaneous, continuous withdrawal to the international borders is the preferred course of action. Neither Damascus nor Tel Aviv is prepared to accept this approach, however, and a phased disengagement is the only politically viable possibility.

A phased withdrawal has serious shortcomings. In our judgment, a phased disengagement would make sense only if it involved an Israeli pullback to the 40-45 kilometer line coupled with a Syrian withdrawal from the Metn and the Sannin ridgeline. The Israelis will want agreement for total PLO withdrawal in advance. Moreover, both sides would find this arrangement difficult to accept for a variety of other political and military reasons.

- A Syrian pullback from the Metn and Sannin ridgeline would place remaining Syrian forces in the Biqa' Valley in a tactically untenable position. If Syria accepted such a disengagement, moreover, it would make sense militarily to withdraw its forces in the Biqa' to Baalbek or to Syria. Such a move, however, would split Syrian forces dangerously and make mutual reinforcement in the event of an Israeli drive up the Biqa' virtually impossible.

Because of the serious military drawbacks from the Syrian perspective, Damascus would probably accept such a move only if a strong monitoring force separating Israeli and Syrian positions was put in place.

- There are three possibilities for such a force. The Lebanese army is too weak and incapable of performing the task. UNIFIL forces or an expanded UN observer group would be clearly unacceptable to the Israelis. Only a greatly expanded Multinational Force with a mandate to patrol and enforce the disengagement would be acceptable to the Syrians and Israelis in this monitoring role. The Syrians, given the military risks involved, would almost certainly insist on such a force before agreeing to disengagement.

This assessment was prepared jointly by CIA/DDI and State/INR under the auspices of NIO/NESA. It was coordinated at the working level with DIA.

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We believe the Israelis would lose little militarily if they disengaged to the 40-45 kilometer line. They would retain an ability to strike at the Syrians in the Bika' with little difficulty. But the Israelis would probably see major political difficulties in accepting a disengagement.

- They would argue that it does not address the problem of the remaining Palestinian forces in northern Lebanon, a goal which Begin and Sharon have consistently argued is of equal if not greater importance than Syrian and Israeli withdrawal.
- A limited disengagement brings Tel Aviv no closer to achieving its political goals in Lebanon -- arranging a peace treaty and securing the withdrawal of the Syrian and the PLO -- and thus opens Begin to internal criticism that he has expended significant resources and achieved little in return.

If a limited disengagement along the lines outlined above could be achieved, we believe it would accelerate the trend towards zones of influence because both sides would be reluctant to make further withdrawals and there would be little political or military leverage available to force them to do so.

- Israel is constructing numerous permanent support facilities and fortifications in the 40-45 kilometer zone and is assisting Major Haddad's Christian militia to expand its control in the security zone.
- Israel would argue that any further withdrawals could result only from direct negotiations with the government of Lebanon and would have to address Israel's security concerns.
- The Syrians could then cite the Israeli actions as justifying a continued Syrian presence in northern Lebanon.

Failure to move beyond a limited disengagement would have the following implications:

- An armed Palestinian presence will remain in the northern, Syrian-occupied area. This presence may increase by returnees from the Beirut diaspora. Palestinian civilians from Beirut and south Lebanon, intimidated by central government activity, will probably also find their way north. Over time, this will feed armed militias with new recruits.
- In a similar manner in the south, pro-Israeli Lebanese elements such as Haddad's militia will remain with the Israelis.

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- In both areas the Lebanese government will exercise little real influence.

Even if sustained diplomatic pressure by the US leads to a complete Syrian and Israeli withdrawal sometime later, both the PLO and Haddad will remain active until the Lebanese army becomes more capable of dealing with them.

- In this context, avoiding an open-ended MNF presence in Lebanon requires a decision to withdraw the MNF before the situation is finally resolved in all its dimensions.